



Environmental Purchasing Bulletin

Greenwashing

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- Past EP Bulletins

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Introduction

Consumers want to behave in ways that do not harm the environment, but a lack of reliable standards leaves them at the mercy of marketers for information. Today's bulletin is about "Greenwashing," about the organizations that create and maintain standards for product performance, and about progress toward standards of environmental preferability that can clear away some of the confusion about what "green" really means.

Greenwashing

Green-wash

(green'wash', -wôsh') – verb

The act of misleading consumers regarding the environmental practices of a company or the environmental benefits of a product or service.

A recent study of 1,018 "green" products from big-box stores has found that all but **one** was marketed with false or misleading eco-claims. Researchers from **TerraChoice** Environmental Marketing, which manages the **EcoLogo** Program, called out products for committing the "**Six Sins of Greenwashing**:"

Sin of the Hidden Trade-Off – e.g. toxic loaded electronics touting their energy efficiency

Sin of No Proof – no certifiable verification of green claims

Sin of Vagueness – e.g. products claiming "all natural," which could include hazardous substances that occur naturally

Sin of Irrelevance – e.g., products claiming to be CFC-free even though CFCs have long been banned

Sin of Fibbing – making false claims about certification

Sin of the Lesser of Two Evils – e.g. organic cigarettes

What Can We Do?

For a start, we can support companies who truthfully represent their environmental qualities.

One good approach is to look for widely accepted environmental standards and certifications.

"All Natural"

"Green"

"Non-Toxic"

"Environmentally
Friendly"

"Earth Friendly"

**These claims are
vague**

Governments and standard-setting bodies have attempted to discourage greenwashing, but the marketing of "green" is at an all time high and confusion reigns. Fortunately, tools are becoming available that we can use to evaluate the truth of environmental marketing claims.

Support Standards (excerpts from Terrachoice – see [report](#) for details)

Multi-Attribute Standard Setting and Certification Organizations
(They examine multiple environmental attributes throughout the entire lifecycle of a product, often with third party certification)

- [EcoLogo](#) (certifies many product types)
- [Chlorine Free Products Association](#) (certifies paper & tissue products)
- [Green Seal](#) (certifies many product types and services)

Single Attribute Environmental Standard Setting and Certification Organization
(They examine a single environmental attribute such as recycled content with third party certification)

- [Forest Stewardship Council](#) (certifies wood products obtained from sustainably harvested forests)
- [Green-e](#) (certifies sources of renewable electricity and products generated from clean energy sources)
- [Green Guard](#) (certifies products based on indoor air quality issues)

Additional Environmental Standards (They allow manufacturers to declare their products meet a publicly available standard)

- [Energy Star Program](#) (lists products meeting the Federal governments efficiency requirements)
- [EPEAT](#) (ranks computer desktops, laptops, and monitors into EPEAT Bronze, Silver, or Gold categories based on more than 50 environmental criteria)

Verify Labels

As a consumer, you can verify the labels that you see by referencing this tool:

- [Consumers Union Eco-Labels](#) The Consumers Union has put together a tool that can be used to get educated on the meaning of eco-labels on food, wood, personal care products and household cleaners.

For More Information

[Wikipedia](#) – Definition of Greenwash

The [Six Sins of Greenwashing](#) (Terrachoice report)

[Consumers Union Eco-Labels](#)

[Federal Trade Commission – Environmental Marketing Claims](#)

[Greenwashing Blog](#) - American Public Media



Environmental Purchasing Program

The King County Environmental Purchasing Program assists County agencies in implementation of King County [Executive Policy CON-7-1-2](#), which requires agencies to use recycled and other environmentally preferable products wherever practicable.

The program assembles information about these products and makes it available to specific agency users who can evaluate them and develop applications in County projects.

These environmental purchasing bulletins contain information about the results of product evaluations and other accomplishments of County agencies. We hope this information will help you find ways to use environmentally preferable products in the work of your agency and that you will contact us if we can help you with further information or if you have suggestions.